



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# CRITICISM AND SCIENCE

BY JOHN M. ROBERTSON, M. P.

---

CHANCING recently upon a forgotten obituary notice of Lowell, I find that I wrote thus of him at his death:

Needless to say, Lowell's want of science and method must affect his literary criticism, on some sides, as Arnold's did his. Both men had a fine literary palate, which was the foundation of their critical work; and they have each done for thousands of us the inestimable service of helping us to know and discriminate literary beauty and charm, and to find in these an indestructible solace and inspiration. To do this is to be abreast of, and to minister to, a full half of the intellectual needs of the age, for not half of the people of any country are yet near the point of profiting by the best ministry of the literature that lies to their hand. Civilization has been on this side one long failure. Thus it is only the few who are concerned to trace and expound the inadequacies and the misjudgments of Lowell and Arnold in their treatment of what we may call the science of literature. No need to speak of them further here: the work of analysis will doubtless be done soon enough.

That the work had already been done to some extent in the United States I gather from Mr. Ferris Greenslet's biography of Lowell, published in 1905; and it has since been done with much completeness and competence by Dr. Joseph J. Reilly in his *James Russell Lowell as a Critic*, to which I referred at some length in my article on Lowell in a recent issue of the REVIEW.

We are invited to make up our minds as to the literary status of Lowell, the critic. Mr. Reilly concludes with the verdict that

If Lowell is to survive, it must be frankly as an impressionist. For so far as criticism approaches a science, so far as it depends to any serious extent on ultimate principles, so far, in a word, as it is something more fundamental and abiding than the *ipse dixit* of an appreciator, Lowell is not a critic.

This drastic judgment is supported by Dr. Reilly, and to some extent anticipated by Mr. Greenslet, in really excellent analyses of Lowell's method and matter, which

only at certain points seem to me to be open to serious challenge. Dr. Reilly shows Lowell to be imperfect in his literary sympathies, radically and frequently contradictory in his statement of what he represents as fundamental critical positions, inconsistent in his tests, unphilosophical in many of his analyses and generalizations, and, as a general result, often disappointing, "provoking" to people of warm feelings. Barring certain rectifications of particular judgments by Dr. Reilly which seem to me to be called for, I do not think his general indictment can really be rebutted. The issue is as to his final verdict, that from a scientific point of view "Lowell is not a critic."

Those of us who have expressly striven for "science in criticism" are specially interested in having the final verdict properly put. On Dr. Reilly's view, an impressionist critic is properly not a critic at all. He does not do or seek to do what the spirit of critical science requires at the critic's hands, which is, by implication, to reach judgments proximately as unassailable as those reached in the sciences commonly so called. Such a judgment will probably be, and perhaps has already been, challenged in the name of criticism itself, and is not unlikely to have the effect of arousing hostility to the very ideal that Dr. Reilly champions. Fifty years ago Sainte-Beuve, one of the great practitioners, insisted that criticism is "*an art*," which the merely anecdotic state of "the science of the moralist" prevented from attaining scientific status. A quarter of a century ago, Professor Droz of Besançon, in a carefully reasoned study, declared that "literary criticism, in so far as it sets itself to judge the beauty of works, is not a science." Dr. Reilly might perhaps reply that by criticism he does not understand merely the judging of literary beauty, and that Lowell, like most other critics, attempted much more than that. But even if we take in the whole field, and include in criticism the judging of authors and the estimating of all the grounds of their appeal, the demand put by M. Droz would probably still be forthcoming if the process of judgment throughout the field were claimed to be "a science." Solution of the deadlock, I suspect, is to be found only by discriminating between the forces of the expressions "a science," "science," "scientific."

The term "science," and still more "*a science*," by common agreement carries the usual sense of a body of

ascertained and co-ordinated knowledge, formulated in textbooks, and in the main or in large part agreed upon among special students, with reservation only of some matters in dispute for the time being. Now in this sense, clearly, a "science of criticism" does not exist and is not likely to exist in the near future. But then this sense, which merely indicates the most common application of the term, does not constitute its whole scope, even in academic usage. There is in constant use the phrase "moral science," though it would be hard to make out that there is any body of accepted knowledge coming under that head. And so it is with such terms as "historic science" and "political science": nay, experts in economics have not yet done debating as to whether that specialism is a science or an art, though "economic science" has just as much currency as "moral science." We are forced, in short, to remember that "science" has a generic as well as a particular, an abstract as well as a special meaning; and that the term "scientific" is even wider in its applicability.

Science, which primarily means simply knowledge, has come to mean exact and tested and ordered knowledge, and thus really signifies just the carefully ascertained truth about things; even as "scientific" points to a methodical and circumspect as against a haphazard or purely impressionist way of thinking, inquiring, and judging. And if we but ask ourselves how, where, and when science did or does begin, we are compelled to see that the quasi-absolute force which we tend to assign to the word is a straining of the facts. There was no moment at which geology or astronomy or biology became a science after being non-science. There is science in all considerate and painstaking notation and collocation of facts. Men proceed by generalizations and hypotheses, which are checked by other men and modified and recast, and then made the basis of other generalizations and hypotheses, which are similarly treated. In the words of F. A. Wolf, adopted by Matthew Arnold, "all learning is scientific which is systematically laid out and followed up to the original sources." This necessarily means tentative approach, some error, and rectification. Absence of error cannot be made the mark of a science, for every science goes on admitting rectifications, to say nothing of re-formulations. Scientific method is just

careful, critical, reflective, tested and consistent method. For that very reason, there arises in regard to literary criticism, which claims to be reflective and judicial, the demand that it shall become less haphazard, less arbitrary, more consistent than it has been. And the demand is in the long run irresistible. Impatient men of letters, and emotional readers, may protest that it is all a matter of comparing tastes, which in the nature of things vary; but this protest will not carry them far. If they are convicted, as so many critics have been, of pronouncing expressly contradictory judgments, and are challenged to say which term of the contradiction expresses their "taste," even they must so far bow to the demand for circumspection. If they choose to say, with Whitman in a humorous mood, "If I contradict myself, why then I contradict myself," they merely end, so far as they are concerned, the discussion; which will go on in their absence, among people content to recognize the multiplication table. They must go further, or fare worse. Mr. Arthur Symons did go further when, over twenty years ago, he declared concerning an appeal for science in criticism that such science, as he understood it, would not be literature. And in large measure he may be said to have been right, having regard to the current aesthetic force of the term literature. It implies a concern for beauty or charm of statement, a way of saying things that is in itself an artistic possession. The primary purpose of science is different: it aims at tracing law and causation; and the proposed critical science, or scientific criticism, would aim at tracing law and causation in respect of literary effects, following up the literary phenomena on the one hand to the mental structure of the writer studied, and on the other hand to the varieties of mental structure and bias which determine the varying response of the reader. I am not sure whether Mr. Symons would have said that *this* procedure could not be literature. But some probably would; and the answer to them would be something like this:

It is quite true that an eloquent or finely phrased "appreciation" of an author, "laying down the law" as to his merits and demerits, his character and his gifts, may be more readily made a source of literary pleasure than an enquiry which proceeds judicially, examines contrary estimates, analyzing problems and propositions, and tracing ef-

fects and impressions on the one hand to varying faculties in the author and on the other to varying receptivity in the readers. It is common ground that Lowell's criticisms give much literary pleasure by their impressionism. But then Lowell certainly claimed, at least implicitly, to be doing more than conveying impressions, unless we are to say that a man does no more than that who emphatically and elaborately says "the thing *is* so," and impugns or derides those who say it is otherwise. In a word, the purely impressionist critic is nowhere to be found in bulk. The mere impressionist does not write, or very rarely writes, his judgments; whereas Lowell was a critic and judge by profession. And no critic can have it both ways. When he puts a definite judgment he is claiming to convey a truth to people who believe that truth in that regard is attainable; and he must admit his judgment to be open to the tests of truth—consistency, adequacy to the problem, conformity to admitted facts. Lowell surely made the admission.

And even if, for the time being, there is less sparkle and charm about the more circumspect enquiry than about the more heedless pronouncement, the matter does not end there. Literature which claims to guide opinion, while it may win much of the privilege of poetry—the typical mode of literary art, and the one which is avowedly most alien in its aim to the aim of science—is always more conditioned than is poetry by the test of rightness and consistency of thought. Even poetry cannot wholly escape the test. Newman's *Lead, kindly light*, has been subjected, by people quite sympathetic with its mood, to tests of simple analysis of meaning which disconcert old admirers, leaving them less enthusiastic, or even unenthusiastic. And criticism, which, however "literary", is necessarily ratiocinative, where poetry is relatively "simple, sensuous, and passionate", cannot but be impaired even as to its charm by the discovery that it is false, that its implied reasoning is absurd, that its judgments are inadequate or self-contradictory. Say what they will, critics know this; and if they have the root of the matter in them they practice vigilance, *self-criticism*, caution in judgment.

In a word, they seek to become more scientific than they were, or than their predecessors were. Arnold's primary and characteristic demand was that criticism shall become more heedful, more thoughtful, and so more veridical; and

Lowell's criticism is from the first an appeal for rectifications. And if these critics succeeded in being from the first more truly "literary" than those whose judgments they challenged, whereas those who in turn challenge them are forced by their clearer purpose and more ratiocinative task to a process of analysis, eristic and judicial, which at first partakes more of the tone of science than of that of literature, the latter are not thereby in the least confuted. The more single-minded among them will not even concern themselves as to whether they shall ultimately hold literary or scientific status—or any status at all. It will suffice for them that they reached or sought truth.

But the more scrupulously truth-seeking criticism is really not ultimately debarred from "literary" status even by acceptance of that drudgery of patient thought from which the impressionistic innovators recoiled or abstained—or, let us plainly say, for which they were not qualified. The more scientific grasp of truth, the sifted truth, passes in due course into the blood streams, as it were, of the new generation, becoming as truly part of the life of feeling as were the untested guesses and intuitions of the past; and in that stage it is as much matter of "literature" as what went before. Under Arnold's ill-considered and formally false definition of poetry as "at bottom criticism of life", lies the truth that even poetry is ultimately tested by its hold on sanity, its congruity with life and things, its relation to the developing psychosis and philosophy of the evolving world. Thus a great deal of temporarily successful literature tends in time to fail as literature.

The same is true, certainly, of what aims at being science. Much of the criticism of past centuries took a quasi-scientific form, and professed a scientific purpose. Burke in his day wrote of "the science of criticism," and Kames claimed that it was "a rational science"; and their science did not prove adequate. Yet the just inference is not a verdict for the anti-scientific spirit, or for the rejection of the scientific. Kames had his effect on the literature of his age in so far (it was not very far) as his own aesthetic perceptions were abreast of the existing product. Science means a perpetual reconsideration, even as literature is a perpetual re-impression and re-wording of feeling and thought. Twenty years ago, French students filled with the new spirit had come to employ "*de la littérature*" as a term of derision: It sig-

nified for them obscurantism, the preference for verbiage over reasoned thought, rhetoric over true criticism, declamation over the scientific spirit.

But their derision does not dispose of the spirit of literature, any more than literary obscurantism disposes of the spirit of science. Science and literature alike are at perpetual grips with inertia: the struggle is the eternal and fundamental conflict between the forces of change and the forces of resistance to change. The new criticism, in due course, becomes literature just as did the old. Hennequin's treatise on *La Critique Scientifique* is indeed a work of nearly pure science, hard to read and master, avowedly (even needlessly and unfortunately) repellent in terminology; but his critiques of authors are just as truly literature as are Lowell's, albeit a drier wine. Impressionism has not disappeared: in reality we get the impressionism of a new knowledge, no longer amateurish—at least relatively much less so—but in its more watchful way quite as confident as the old; perhaps, some will say, quite as overconfident. For there is more science to come, more reconsideration, a recognition of yet further problems, with doubtless a further recasting of criticism. Such is the law of evolution, in literature as in life.

JOHN M. ROBERTSON.